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“UNCAUSED BEGINNINGS” REVISITED

Graham Oppy

William Lane Craig’s “Reflections on ‘Uncaused Beginnings’” is a sustained critique of my “Uncaused Beginnings.” I argue that the central arguments of my essay survive that critique unscathed. When we make a fair and accurate comparison of naturalist and theist claims about global causal reality, we see that considerations about causation and the shape of causal reality do not decide between naturalism and theism. Moreover, the Edwards/Prior/Craig objection does not rule out the view that there is an initial global causal state involving none but contingently existing entities.

1

Compare two views about global causal reality. Both views suppose that there is a contingent initial global causal state involving at least one necessarily existent entity. Both views suppose that the initial global causal state is the only global causal state that has no cause; both views also suppose that the only further causal states that have no cause are initial states of entities that belong to and/or are sub-states of the initial global causal state.

One view is *naturalistic*. This view says that global causal reality is the causal evolution of an entirely natural, necessarily existent entity: the universe (or multiverse, or what have you). The initial global causal state is the initial state of the universe; all subsequent global causal states are subsequent causal states of the universe, arrived at by a process of causal evolution from the initial state of the universe.

The other view is *theistic*. This view says that global causal reality is the causal evolution of a partly supernatural system which contains both a necessarily existing creator God, and a contingently existing natural entity: the universe (or multiverse, or what have you). The initial global causal state is the initial state of God (prior to creation); subsequent to creation, global causal states are states of a system that includes both God and the universe, arrived at by a process of causal evolution from the initial state of the system.

Both views share the following thesis about modality: all possible worlds begin with an initial state of the very same entity, and that initial state is brutally contingent. On the theistic view, the entity in question is God: every possible world begins with God, but the creative dispositions with which God is equipped are brutally contingent—there is no explanation, in



any possible world, why God has the creative dispositions that God has in that world, rather than other creative dispositions that God might have had instead. On the naturalistic view, the entity in question is the universe: every possible world begins with an initial state of the universe, but the initial properties of the universe which govern its subsequent evolution are brutally contingent—there is no explanation, in any possible world, why the universe has the initial properties that it does, rather than other initial properties that it might have had instead.

Both views come in deterministic and non-deterministic versions. On deterministic versions of these views, the causal evolution of the state of global causal reality is deterministic; on non-deterministic versions of these views, the causal evolution of the state of global causal reality—and of entities that belong to and/or are sub-states of global causal reality—is (at least somewhere) chancy. On either version, there is no non-initial point at which there is entirely uncaused evolution of state: there is no non-initial point at which entities “pop into existence uncaused.” Moreover, it is a matter for semantic decision whether we say, on each view, that any entity that exists in the initial state “pops into existence uncaused”: we could define “pops into existence” in such a way that both God (on the theist view) and the universe (on the naturalist view) pop into existence uncaused; or we could define “pops into existence” in such a way that neither God (on the theist view) nor the universe (on the naturalist view) pops into existence uncaused.

There are, of course, many variants of both views. We might suppose that there is no initial state, but rather an infinite regress. We might suppose that the initial state is necessary. We might suppose that the entities that exist in the initial state are contingent, and that there might have been nothing. We might suppose that the entities that exist in the initial state are contingent, and that there might have been different initial entities. And so forth.

2

William Lane Craig’s “Reflections on ‘Uncaused Beginnings’”¹ is committed to the theistic view that I identified initially. By contrast, I’m undecided between a range of naturalistic views: the naturalistic view that I identified initially, the variant of that view on which the initial state is necessary, the variant of that view in which there is an infinite regress; and perhaps other views besides. If forced to choose, I would probably opt for the variant of the view on which the initial state is necessary, though not with any degree of confidence. However, I deny that I need to choose in order to have reason to prefer naturalism to theism: for, by my lights, on *each* variant of the two views, the naturalist account is preferable to the theist account.

¹William Craig, “Reflections on ‘Uncaused Beginnings,’” *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010), 72–78.

If we compare the two views that I identified initially, then it seems to me obvious that these two views are tied when it comes to considerations about causation and the structure of (global) causal reality. However, it appears that Craig disagrees. He claims, for example, (a) that the naturalist view just assumes that things which feature in an initial state of reality must be capable of persisting (75); and (b) that it is just *ad hoc* conjecture, on the part of the naturalist view, to suppose that all possible worlds have an initial state constituted entirely by the contingent state of a necessarily existing entity (76); and (c) that the naturalist view involves a conflation of causal order with temporal order (72); and (d) that the naturalist view rules out simultaneous causation (73); and (e) that the naturalist view fails because temporal becoming is an objective feature of reality (74). On the contrary, it seems to me that there is obvious parity between the two views with respect to all of these claims: if the naturalist view "just assumes" that things which feature in an initial state of reality must be capable of persisting, then so does the theist view; if it is just *ad hoc* conjecture for the naturalist to suppose that all possible worlds have an initial state constituted entirely by the contingent state of a necessarily existing entity, then it is equally *ad hoc* conjecture for the theist to make this supposition; if the naturalist view involves a conflation of causal order with temporal order, then so does the theist view; if the naturalist view rules out simultaneous causation, then so does the theist view; if the naturalist view fails because temporal becoming is an objective feature of reality, then so does the theist view.

A referee for this journal suggested that the naturalist view falls behind the theistic view because it involves rejection of plausible modal recombination principles. But here, too, it seems obvious to me that there is parity. If we suppose that there is a contingent initial state involving a necessarily existent entity, then the nature and existence of that necessarily existent entity imposes restrictions on whatever modal recombination principles there may be. In particular, given that there is this necessarily existent entity, it is impossible that there are worlds in which there are none but contingently existing entities; and it is impossible that there are worlds in which there is nothing that instantiates the essential properties of the necessarily existing entity.

3

The main arguments in my "Uncaused Beginnings"² are concerned with a particular objection to the view which has it that the initial state involves none but contingently existing entities. This objection—the Edwards/Prior/Craig objection—claims that if you deny that it is possible for a raging tiger to "suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing" in the room in which you are reading this article, then you cannot consistently

²Graham Oppy, "Uncaused Beginnings," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010), 61–71.

allow that it is possible for the initial state of reality to “suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing.”

In “Uncaused Beginnings,” I argued that this claim is false. There is independent reason to think that, whether or not it is possible for the initial state of reality to “suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing,” it is impossible for a raging tiger to “suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing” in the room in which you are reading this article. In particular, I argued, it is impossible for a raging tiger to “suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing” in the room in which you are reading this article because there is no place in the room in which you are reading this article that a tiger could come to occupy uncaused. On my view, a thing that does not exist cannot bring about the non-existence of something that does exist; and a natural entity cannot exist except as an occupant of a location in the manifold of natural reality. In the causal order, the displacing activity of the displacing object—the object “popping into existence”—would have to be both (causally) prior to the displacement of the displaced object (in order to cause the displacement) and (causally) posterior to the displacement of the displaced object (in order that the displacing object exists and hence is able to bring about the displacement). But that’s impossible: it cannot be that the displacing activity of the displacing object is both (causally) prior to and (causally) posterior to the displacement of the displacing object.

Craig finds my view “perverse.” He says: “In the causal order, the new object’s coming into being at some place causes the former occupant to vacate the space” (76). As I have just argued, if there is a view here that is “perverse” it is Craig’s, since his view would have non-existent objects making a causal contribution to their own coming into existence.

I also argue that, if—*per impossible*—something did “pop into existence” at a particular location, we would properly regard the vacation of the space now occupied by the thing that comes into existence by the thing(s) that previously occupied that space as a cause—i.e., a necessary causal condition—of the existence of the new occupant of that space. Thus, even in this case, we would not have something popping into existence *uncaused*.

About this case, Craig comments:

on Oppy’s view the current occupant’s vacating the space causes the new object to come into being, which is clearly wrong-headed. Indeed, on Oppy’s view, we are left wondering why an object of precisely the same shape and size did not come into being as a result of the evacuation of a certain spatial region by an object. Why would the movement of a table cause a tiger to pop into being? (77)

I do not accept this. Given that the table is not tiger-shaped, the mere “popping out of existence” of the table would not create a space into which a tiger could fit. What is needed for that is an appropriate tiger-shaped space. In order to make such a space overlapping where the table now is, the table would have to go: but, on its own, the “popping out of existence”

of the table would not even suffice for the creation of an appropriate tiger-shaped space, let alone for the "popping into existence" of a tiger.

In truth, I no more think that things can "pop out of existence within natural reality" uncaused than I think that things can "pop into existence within natural reality" uncaused. My *central* argument is independent of my further argument for the claim that, if it were possible for things to "pop into existence within natural reality" and to "pop out of existence within natural reality," then "poppings into existence" would always have "poppings out of existence" as causes.

4

There is a second string to the Edwards/Prior/Craig objection. It claims that, if you hold that it is possible for the initial state of reality to "suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing," then you cannot consistently deny that it might have been hydrogen atoms or rabbits that "sprang spontaneously from the void."

In "Uncaused Beginnings," I suggested that anyone who supposes that it is possible for the initial state of reality to "suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing" should further maintain: (a) that a contingent initial state of reality and the contingent things that feature therein are the only kinds of contingent things that can have no cause; (b) that anything that is or can be a contingent initial state of reality cannot be anything other than a contingent initial state of reality; (c) that anything that is or can be a non-initial state of reality cannot be anything other than a non-initial state of reality; (d) that anything that features in a contingent initial state of reality can only come into existence as a feature of a contingent initial state of reality; and (e) that anything that comes into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality can only come into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality. Moreover, I suggested that a *naturalist* who supposes that it is possible for the initial state of reality to "suddenly come into existence uncaused out of nothing" should maintain: (f) that the only thing that can exist unaccompanied is natural reality; (g) that the only uncaused state that natural reality can have is its initial state; (h) that the only things that have no cause of their existence are things that are present in the initial state of natural reality; and (i) that the only states of things that have no cause of their obtaining are states that things have in the initial state of natural reality.

Craig says that these claims are "simply fantastic" and "explanatorily vacuous" (75). However, it seems to me that he is, himself, committed to a *very* similar bunch of claims: (a) the contingent initial state of reality and the necessarily existent God that features therein are the only kinds of things that can have no cause; (b) anything that is or can be an initial state of reality cannot be anything other than an initial state of reality; (c) anything that is or can be a non-initial state of reality cannot be anything other than a non-initial state of reality; (d) anything that features in an initial state of reality cannot come into existence in a non-initial state of

reality; (e) anything that comes into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality can only come into existence as a feature of a non-initial state of reality; (f) God is the only thing that can exist unaccompanied in causal reality; (g) the only uncaused state of causal reality is its initial state; (h) the only thing that has no cause of its existence is the thing (God) that is present in the initial state of causal reality; (i) the only state of things that has no cause of their obtaining is the state of God in the initial causal state of reality.

In my view, in order to decide between the competing views here, we need to weigh their theoretical virtues. Which view makes the best trade-off between (a) minimising ontological and ideological commitments and (b) maximising explanation of data? If it turns out that views according to which there is a contingent initial state of global causal reality involving none but contingently existing entities do worse than competing views—e.g., views according to which there is a necessary initial state of global causal reality involving none but necessarily existing entities, and views according to which there is a contingent initial state involving none but necessarily existing entities, and views according to which there is an infinite regress of causal states—when it comes to managing the trade-off between minimising ontological and ideological commitments and maximising explanation of data, then there is good reason to reject views according to which there is a contingent initial state of global causal reality involving none but contingently existing entities. But we cannot discern that views according to which there is a contingent initial state of global causal reality involving none but contingently existing entities do worse than competing views on that trade-off merely by inspecting the kinds of principles mentioned in the preceding two paragraphs. Instead, we must determine the ontological and ideological commitments of the competing views, and we must make a careful scrutiny of exactly how the relevant data is explained by the competing views. While I think that we can see that naturalistic theories fare better than their theistic correlates under this assessment, I am sceptical that we can properly weigh the competing naturalist theories (hence my indecision about which naturalist view to accept).³

³For further discussion of the weighing of naturalism and theism, see: Graham Oppy, "Craig's Kalām Cosmology," *Philo* 12 (2009), 200–216; Graham Oppy, "The Shape of Causal Reality," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010), 273–280; Graham Oppy, "O'Connor's Cosmological Argument," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011), 166–186; Graham Oppy, "God" in N. Manson and R. Barnard, eds., *The Continuum Companion to Metaphysics* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 245–267; Graham Oppy, "Ultimate Naturalistic Casual Explanations," in T. Goldschmidt, ed., *The Puzzle of Existence* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 46–63; and Graham Oppy, *The Best Argument against God* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).